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POPs Treaty and the Real "Stolen Future"

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Another unfortunate step has been taken toward the complete elimination of DDT. Last week, the U.N. Environment Program (UNEP) met in Geneva to discuss the implementation of the Stockholm Convention. The Convention was signed in Stockholm last year and aims to restrict or eliminate persistent organic pollutants, or POPs. Many have welcomed the Convention and the executive director of UNEP, Klaus Topfer has claimed that it is "one of the greatest environmental accomplishments of the past decade."

Of course, there is always another side to the story. One of the twelve chemicals, the so-called dirty dozen that are to be eliminated or restricted, is DDT. This is the insecticide that every right-thinking environmentalist since Rachel Carson loves to hate. Millions of tons of DDT were used in agriculture during the 1950s and 60s, but its use was banned in the U.S. in 1972 after sustained environmentalist pressure. The move was widely welcomed but had disastrous repercussions in countries plagued by malaria and other insect-borne diseases.

DDT is still desperately needed for malaria control in many parts of Africa (where I work), Latin America, and the Indian sub-continent. For this reason, DDT was granted an exemption for use in disease control under the Stockholm Convention. Even so, it is still subject to onerous reporting requirements and costly restrictions on storage and trade.

After pressure from environmentalists, in 1996 the South African Department of Health removed DDT from its malaria control program. What followed was one of the worst malaria epidemics in South African history. The number of cases rose by over a thousand percent in only three years and the annual deaths from malaria rose ten-fold to over 460. In 2000, DDT spraying was reintroduced and within one year the number of cases fell over 80%. South Africa's Department of Health recognizes that the most important factor in the control of malaria has been the use of DDT.

On the Zambian Copperbelt, DDT was recently used in a malaria control program sponsored by one of the international mining companies. In an area that hadn't had any malaria control at all since the early 1980s, the use of DDT reduced the number of malaria cases by 50% after just one spraying round.

We now know that most of the supposed environmental impacts of DDT use were wildly exaggerated and that the human health harms have failed to materialize. We are constantly being bombarded with laboratory studies claiming to find some new drastic human health impact from DDT. Yet the chemical has been used in vast quantities all around the globe for nearly sixty years and not one scientifically replicated study has been able to produce a single case of actual harm to human health. Contrast this

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with the millions of people who are alive and healthy now thanks to DDT.

Although many environmentalists now concede that DDT is still necessary for malaria control and that it does save lives, the pressure to phase it out is still strong. Writing in *Our Planet*, the UNEP publication, John Peterson Myers — co-author of *Our Stolen Future*, the book famous for arguing that we are influenced by man-made environmental estrogens — highlights the supposed link between DDT use and pre-term births of infants. Not only does Myers not mention the enormous benefits of using DDT, but he also doesn't take into account the fact that most fatalities from malaria are among children under the age of five and pregnant women. The possible risks of pre-term births, even if they are confirmed by subsequent studies, need to be balanced against the very real risk of dying from malaria.

Myers goes on to demand that "persistent bioaccumulative compounds should be eliminated from use without demonstrating toxicological risk." Perhaps this approach will go down well in safe, clean, and healthy areas like Scandinavia or Vermont, but Myers (and most environmentalists) completely fails to appreciate that in Mozambique or Zambia, bioaccumulative compounds can vastly improve life for millions of people. There are enormous risks that people in developing countries face from *not* having man-made chemicals, rather than the other way around.

The UNEP and the WHO have taken it upon themselves to determine whether DDT is still necessary for disease control. While the WHO recognizes the need for DDT and insecticides in general for malaria control, it focuses far more on the use of bed nets and other methods of control that are considered more "sustainable." Most aid agencies will not support the use of any insecticides, let alone DDT. This is a shame. South Africa's recent experience shows how many lives can be saved with a well-managed vector control program using DDT. If the WHO and aid agencies are really interested in saving lives, then surely they should be promoting the correct use of DDT, rather than thinking up ways of restricting its use.

People in the malarial areas of South Africa are now healthier and wealthier than they were a few years ago. It would be hard to think of a clearer example of sustainable development. The environmental impacts of DDT use are negligible and the chemical has not only sustained lives, it has improved them immeasurably. All that the eco-imperialist Stockholm Convention seems able to sustain is endless conferences, discussions, workshops, directives, and mountains of paper.

Instead of patting themselves on the back for producing such an environmental accomplishment, UNEP and its environmentalist supporters should be considering the lives lost in the name of the nebulous concept of sustainable development. I now publicly invite John Peterson Myers to visit the graveyards and cemeteries of South Africa so that he may see some actual stolen futures.

Richard Tren is a director of the South Africa-based health NGO called Africa Fighting Malaria (see fightingmalaria.org).

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